DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 527 EA 030 800

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TITLE	Managing Leadership Transitions in Education Partnerships. Knowledge Brief.
INSTITUTION	WestEd, San Francisco, CA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	9p.
CONTRACT	RJ96006901
AVAILABLE FROM	WestEd, 730 Harrison St., San Francisco, CA 94107-1242 ($8). Tel: 877-493-7833 (Toll Free); Web site: http://www.WestEd.org/policy/. For full text: http://www.WestEd.org/wested/pubs/online/transitions/pdf.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Curriculum Development; Educational Change; *Educational Finance; Elementary Secondary Education; *Faculty Mobility; *Leadership; *Leadership Training; *Partnerships in Education; Public Schools; *Technological Advancement

ABSTRACT

A growing number of organizations--from school districts and businesses, to universities and community groups--are forming partnerships to improve elementary and secondary education. Varying in both structure and goals, these collaborative enterprises provide a valuable forum for addressing areas of mutual concern about education, including funding issues, curriculum reform, effective uses of technology, mathematics and science assessments, and literacy. This paper focuses on how partnerships can manage the loss of a key member. It discusses ways that successful partnerships can use strategies for remaining effective over time to build long-term relationships and survive the departure of a key member. The guide also offers pointers about coping with leadership turnover, how to find a successor, and how relying heavily on one person to play most leadership roles leaves a partnership vulnerable. (Contains 10 references.) (DFR)

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managing LEADERSHIP transitions in education partnerships

A growing number of organizations — from school districts and businesses, to universities and community groups — are forming partnerships to improve elementary and secondary education. Varying in both structure and goals, these collaborative enterprises provide a valuable forum for addressing areas of mutual concern about education, including funding issues, curriculum reform, effective uses of technology, mathematics and science assessments, and literacy, to name a few.

Written by Danielle Briggs

This brief is part of a series exploring the benefits and challenges of educational partnerships. Second in the series, this paper focuses on how partnerships can manage the loss of a key member. For more information about different types of collaborative inter-agency relationships, please consult the WestEd Knowledge Brief "What it Takes to Work Together: The Promise of Educational Partnerships" by BethAnn Berliner (1997).

Partnerships may be born when multiple school districts come together to cope with a common challenge, such as attracting and retaining top-quality teaching staff. They may also be created when representatives of school districts, key businesses and a local university gather to address common interests, such as school-to-work issues or the best use of technology in schools.

There is no blueprint for a successful partnership. Indeed, interagency collaborative arrangements differ on a number of fronts, including level of formality, types of activities, how deeply funds are combined, how decisions are made, and how information is shared. Many combinations of member organizations can work together effectively under any one of a variety of organizational structures. To capture the range of these ventures in this brief, we use the words network, alliance, partnership, and consortium interchangeably.

Whatever their composition, purpose, or structure, most partnerships eventually encounter many of the same challenges. This brief focuses on transitions in leadership – a critical and common stage in most partnerships. In one of the most extensive evaluations of education alliances, over 50 percent of those studied had experienced leadership turnover within a

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three-year period (Tushnet, et al., 1995 and 1993). Whether a leader's departure is long anticipated, or announced as he or she walks out the door, for those who remain, the results can be disruptive: loss of focus, momentum and, even, commitment. In all cases, such losses can threaten the group's short-term successes. In some cases, it can threaten the group's very survival.

Consider the multi-district alliance that lost one of its key district superintendents and a project coordinator at the same time. Because the retiring superintendent's school board decided that his replacement should have the opportunity to participate in hiring a new project director, a lengthy lag in action ensued. Most damaging, while the partnership was idle, leading business and agency representatives who had committed to work with the alliance began to question their involvement.

A lack of leadership for any duration can be particularly devastating to newly formed partnerships, as was the case in the above example. Many new alliances have neither the momentum nor the well-oiled internal communications that help collaborative efforts to weather the departure of a key member. But even for more seasoned partnerships, loss of leadership can strain the enterprise.

There is, however, a potential up side to leadership transition. With preparation, teamwork, and the right strategies, partnerships can not only survive this period, but actually emerge stronger, better focused, and more effective. The strategies described in this brief have been used by partnerships to successfully cope with changes in leadership, integrate new members, and plan ahead for a sustainable alliance. Intuitive or commonsensical as they might seem, these broad guidelines can nonetheless help a partnership either survive a leadership crisis or ward one off entirely.

Leaders in Partnerships

A leader, in the broadest sense, is an individual at any level of a partnership who plays a guiding and mobilizing role. In that role, an individual may take on any of a variety of responsibilities:

- helping initially define and then fine-tune the group's vision and goals;
- building commitment and communicating the partnership's vision among all partners;
- mobilizing resources, including personnel, time, materials, and technical assistance, to ensure that the partnership and its members operate effectively and efficiently;
- facilitating communication and collaborative decisions through consensus building;
- providing links between the different cultures of member organizations;
- guiding the work of the partnership, monitoring its efforts to make sure they are on track with the group's vision, and facilitating re-evaluation when necessary;
- providing support, encouragement, and recognition for collaborative efforts;
- handling problems and checking to make sure individual and agency needs are met; and
- drawing upon the expertise of others in the design, implementation, and institutionalization of partnership's work and structure, including cultivating leadership and collaborative skills among fellow partnership members.

Leaders come to their roles in different ways. Some groups formally anoint someone, hiring an executive director from whom they expect both operational expertise and overall guidance, or electing a chairperson to oversee the whole effort. In operating its professional development school, the Colorado Partnership for Educational Renewal (CoPER) combines both types of formal leadership. As a consortium of school, district, and university administrators, CoPER hired an executive director to lead it. But the group also formally rotates the responsibility for facilitating meetings among

representatives from partner schools, districts and universities.

In many instances, however, an alliance finds itself with a *de facto* leader, someone who gains influence by strength of personality or clarity of vision, because he or she was a founding member of the group, or by virtue of specialized knowledge or skills. In fact, many who rise to positions of informal leadership are multi-talented and could conceivably end up holding the reins on many levels: polling partners to glean common issues, pursuing funding opportunities, setting meeting agendas, and drawing information and outside resources into the group. If other members have not also assumed — or prepared themselves to assume — some of these duties, the group might well find itself overly dependent on one individual. In his or her absence, the group could flounder.

In some partnerships, participants actually share many of the central responsibilities, but rely on one particular member to keep them focused on the "big picture." This person may stay abreast of current trends and knowledge, anticipate changes in the field, and have a talent for plotting what is required for the partnership to meet its goals. The loss of this type of leader could interfere with the group's ability to plan strategically and could temporarily slow the pace of its work.

Staying Strong

Successful partnerships use a number of strategies for remaining effective over time. Here are some examples of things partnerships can do to maintain momentum, build long-term relationships, and survive the departure of a key member.

Governance

Develop interagency agreements, or memorandums of understanding, that detail shared responsibility, resources, and authority. These documents formalize the way an alliance operates and the roles of each member. Integrate the partnership's policies into member agencies' policy and procedure manuals. Establish a system to continuously gather feedback about the impact of partnership's activities. This information informs modifications and improvements to alliance goals, strategies, and activities.

Budgets and Resources

Include funds for partnership activities and operating structures in the budgets of each member agency. For example, a single line item budget could show the organization's contributions to the partnership's resources, operational expenses, and staffing. Balance the power of all member agencies, making sure each contributes resources according to its ability, while also trying to prevent one agency from dominating by contributing considerably more than the others. Designate a fiscal agent, preferably one organization that can manage and organize resources for the partnership. Consider establishing a freestanding not-for-profit agency so funding is not associated with one particular agency. Engage in a continual search for external funding, but diversify funding sources and be cautious of over-dependency on external funding. Give forethought to ongoing costs (e.g., maintenance, administrative support, staffing, professional development for new and seasoned staff, materials, and evaluation) and how the partnership will meet those costs.

Personnel

Work to influence member agencies to include partnership duties and responsibilities in job descriptions when possible and incorporate these responsibilities into performance evaluations. Involve many people at different levels of member organizations. Provide on-going training and assistance for staff to meet the demands of their work, this includes technical support, resources and materials, and planning and release time.

Source: Adapted from Tushnet, et al. (1995). *Documentation and Evaluation of the Educational Partnerships Program. Final Report.* Los Alamitos, CA: Southwest Regional Laboratory.

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More often than not, remaining members have little control over who will replace an informal leader who leaves. While it is not typical, sometimes a new partner brings in competing priorities, or even regard the partnership as less of a priority than his or her predecessor did. This lack of commitment could result in the devotion of less time by that member's agency or, in some cases, the withdrawal of the agency altogether.

Coping with Leadership Turnover

In the example given earlier of the alliance that slowed to a virtual standstill after a district superintendent and a project coordinator left simultaneously, some important lessons emerge: Remaining active as a partnership, even at a reduced pace, will help sustain the interest and commitment of all partners. Also, if one or more leaders depart, the remaining member agencies must respond *promptly*, creating a process for keeping the group's commitments and goals alive.

> In some cases, a potential leader already waits in the wings, needing only an opportunity — or invitation — to use his or her guiding and mobilizing skills.

Maintaining momentum is vital. During transitions, priorities and resources may shift, some individuals or member agencies may rethink their commitment, and the partnership's long-term vision may slip out of focus. All these things can be hard to reestablish.

Many partnership members interviewed for this brief stress the importance during transition periods of continuing to work as a collaborative *group*, consistently sharing information and ideas. To do so, they say, it helps to maintain the partnership's internal structure and standard ways of operating. For example, when the Northern Nevada Technology Consortium lost multiple leaders simultaneously, its remaining members maintained the governing board that had been set up when the partnership was established. Doing so allowed members to use existing mechanisms and procedures to replace key staff, recruit new partners, and revisit their vision. Throughout this process, while there was a shift in the actual individuals who represented member agencies in the partnership, the commitment of those agencies remained strong.

Partnership participants also recommend immediately addressing certain specific questions: Who will take on the departing member's alliance responsibilities, both long-term and temporarily? Can the departing member's leadership skills actually be replaced? If so, how? Is there another partner with the skills to take over? If not, in what other ways might the partnership compensate for the loss?

Also important is understanding *why* the individual left. In some cases, staff turnover occurs because of a mismatch in hiring or assignment. Successful alliances move quickly and deliberately to consider how this mistake was made, incorporating this sometimes-difficult inquiry into their collaborative problem-solving efforts. Did the job description not adequately reflect the partnership's needs or this position's responsibilities? Was there a problem with the search process or interview protocol? Are there broader communication or interpersonal issues to be addressed? Transitions are often complicated by politics, communication breakdowns, and anxiety about the unknown. The partnership needs to be aware that there may be some resulting tension, anger, or even blame — all of which are best addressed by members as a group rather than by individuals in one-on-one conversations.

Finding a Successor

In alliances that are losing an executive director or other paid staff and planning to hire another, it is wise to give all partners a voice in the selection process. A new leader is more likely to be well accepted if everyone feels they have had a legitimate say in the choice. One strategy common for doing so is the establishment of a search and selection committee comprising representatives from each partnering agency. The most important aspect of this process is the discussion that takes place within the committee and the opportunity it affords to clarify how various roles and responsibilities contribute to achievement of the group's collective vision.

> Relying heavily on one person to play most leadership roles leaves a partnership vulnerable.

As noted earlier, if the departing leader was a representative of a member organization rather than a partnership employee, remaining participants are unlikely to have a direct say in his or her replacement. There are ways in which they may want to try influencing the hiring process. But they might also consider who else from the member agency could be an effective and committed representative to the partnership, and then lobby for that person's appointment to the group. They might also consider whether the partnership could adjust its way of working to foster greater leadership among remaining members. In some cases, a potential leader already waits in the wings, needing only an opportunity — or invitation — to use his or her guiding and mobilizing skills.

If it's essential, or simply highly likely, that the departing leader's replacement in his or her primary job will also participate in the alliance and even be a formally designated leader in the partnership, remaining members will definitely want to influence the selection process.

One strategy to consider is attending community meetings where the hiring process will be discussed. For example, school districts typically hold such meetings to keep parents and other constituents informed during a search for a new superintendent. Partnership members can raise questions about the role a new superintendent would play in the alliance and use this approach to keep issues of importance to the alliance on the table.

Further, some alliances cultivate and maintain ties with the hiring agency's selection committee and even have their own representatives on the committee. This helps ensure that partnership goals are given voice during interviews and subsequent discussion. These ties also give an alliance access to the job candidates, making it possible to talk with them about the partnership and assess their interest in becoming part of such an endeavor.

It can also be useful to influence job descriptions to be sure that language about the position's role in the partnership is included. Candidates have to address this aspect of the position during interviews, which can inform the search process and result in a better hire.

CoPER has actually created alliance-related job descriptions for those who represent their home agencies in the partnership, including principals, superintendents, and college or university faculty. By making partnership duties explicit in job announcements and noting that participation is a priority for member agencies, partners feel that they have attracted new partners who are dedicated to the enterprise.

Cultivating New Leaders

However they come on board, partnership newcomers are unlikely to start out with a deep understanding of the group's history or vision. So whether a partnership hires a new executive director, incorporates a new

Our Work

WestEd works with several State Alliance Projects, which are committed to working collaboratively on enduring, high priority school improvement initiatives identified by and common to all members. In this work, WestEd plays the role of convener, facilitator, technical assistance provider, and resource broker. Among our regional partnerships are: *Student Success Alliance* (in northwestern Utah); *Northern Nevada Technology Consortium; Greater Phoenix Educational Management Consortium; Western Maricopa Consortium* (in Arizona's Maricopa County); *Arizona Tribal Coalition;* and *California Urban Superintendents Network.*

member as designated leader, or simply takes on a new participant, an orientation period is invaluable. New participants should have access to documentation about the group's origins, activities, and processes, as well as information about the norms and expectations related to membership. When a new superintendent is hired by a member district in Utah's Student Success Alliance, for example, he or she receives background information about the alliance, including a copy of the original memorandum of understanding between partners. Also, veteran participants meet with the new administrator to encourage renewed district commitment.

To build a new member's sense of connection to the group and its activities, some successful partnerships have established mentoring relationships between new and long-standing members. One research study suggests that such pairing helps minimize the time it takes for new members to become productive participants (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

For either a new executive director or a new member, immediate inclusion in the partnership's activities, along with education about its culture and history, contributes to development of a strong and lasting relationship. For the established members who play roles in a newcomer's orientation, this period is another opportunity to strengthen and build the group's collaborative working relationship.

Sustaining an Alliance

In the life of an alliance, it is never too early to engage in strategic planning, including preparing for changes in key membership. In fact, few planning elements can be as valuable to a partnership's effectiveness and survival as strategies to ensure smooth transitions, whether in leadership, specifically, or membership, generally.

Staying Focused. During regular or special meetings, partners can hold strategic planning sessions in which they focus not just on goals and activities, but also on the group's structure and ways of working together. They can anticipate how future challenges — including the loss of a leader — might affect their collaborative relationship, and they can discuss possible solutions. This discussion can then inform the group's strategic plan.

Conducting an annual review of the partnership's vision and mission — its purpose, goals, and strategies — works to regularly re-establish a commitment among partners. As part of this process, a partnership can assess its progress. Doing this review helps members identify gaps and next steps, make refinements, and develop future areas of work. It also serves as an opportunity to attend to interpersonal relationships among partners and maintain — or re-establish — an atmosphere of trust and openness. Partners can celebrate accomplishments, acknowledge contributions, and review the degree to which members feel their needs are being met and their views respected. When representatives from multiple levels of partner agencies are included in such discussions and reviews, two important purposes are served: helping to insure the consideration of diverse perspectives, and building and sustaining shared ownership through all levels of the alliance. Partnership members are more likely to feel that the group's goals are their own.

Developing Sustainable Leadership. As noted earlier, some partnerships rely heavily on one person to play

most, if not all, major leadership roles. This approach, while understandable in many instances and perhaps even highly effective in the short run, nonetheless leaves a partnership vulnerable. It would be sensible for any partnership to consider the following measures: distribute leadership at multiple levels; cultivate new leaders; and, establish clear roles and relationships.

In a partnership with distributed leadership, participants share decision-making, and they work together to reach agreement about the right direction for the group. Such an alliance might have a governing board, as well as task forces or committees that plan and carry out strategic activities. With this kind of structure, decision-making power is spread throughout the membership and not held exclusively — or even primarily — by one person.

New leaders should be identified or nurtured, and encouraged to step up as new needs surface within the group. To facilitate this, some partnerships formally rotate leadership. As noted before, CoPER alternates its leadership/facilitator position between its school or district representatives and its university representatives to be sure power does not rest with any one type of organization. To smooth this periodic transition, the current leader works closely with the person who is next in line, who effectively becomes a co-facilitator.

Conclusion

In much the same way that alliances can play a critical role in developing more effective education practice, alliance leaders can play a critical role in helping partnerships achieve their visions and goals. The departure of a visionary or multi-skilled leader or another sort of key facilitator can rock an alliance at its foundation, undermining its effectiveness. Through the strategies identified in this brief, partners can not only effectively manage the challenge of a leadership transition, but seize the opportunity to assess and sharpen their focus as a group. The hard work this requires will benefit the alliance and consequently the broader community it was conceived to serve.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to those who helped to inform and guide the planning of this document: Richard W. Clark, Institute for Educational Inquiry and the Center for Educational Renewal; Corrine Mantle-Bromley, School of Education, Colorado State University; Lynn Rhodes, School of Education, University of Colorado at Denver; and Carol Wilson, Colorado Partnership for Education Renewal. Thanks, too, to WestEd editor Kate Rix for her tremendous help in developing this brief.

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This report was produced in whole or in part with funds from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract #RJ96006901. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Education.

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